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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 002113

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DEPARTMENT FOR P AND SCA/INS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: AMBASSADOR AND OPPOSITION LEADER
DISCUSS WAY FORWARD ON PEACE PROCESS

REF: A. COLOMBO 2046

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 2078

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On December 20, the Ambassador met with Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the major opposition United National Party (UNP), to discuss the prospects for a Sinhalese consensus on resolving Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Wickremesinghe, who had met with President Rajapaksa earlier that day, saw clear potential for collaboration. He said international pressure on the UNP and governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) could help them to expediently draft a unified negotiating position that the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) can present to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), ideally no later than March. He noted the extreme time sensitivity, expressing worry that if continued government military action in eastern Vakarai appeared to yield a victory, some in the government would push for parliamentary elections, campaigning on the need for a de-merger of the north and east as a prelude to greater military success. Wickremesinghe assessed that such a move would anger the LTTE, perhaps prompting attacks in Colombo and undermining the potential for peace. Wickremesinghe also noted that the President mooted the idea of holding public hearings around the country on the government's peace proposal, which Wickremesinghe thought were unnecessary and would delay the whole process. He and the Ambassador concurred that the US should be prepared to dispatch a special envoy if either (1) the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) process is at risk of unraveling due to JVP or other opposition, or (2) if the APRC process produces a credible power-sharing proposal, to persuade the President to act on the APRC document, instruct his peace delegation to engage seriously, and not allow the new idea of public hearings on the proposal to unduly delay or even squash the peace proposal. End summary.

UNP Committed to Cooperating with SLFP

¶2. (C) On December 20 the Ambassador met with Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the major opposition United National Party (UNP), about the potential for gaining a rapid Sinhalese consensus on addressing the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Wickremesinghe, who had met with President Mahinda Rajapaksa earlier that same day, said there was strong potential for cooperation with the governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Wickremesinghe noted the October MoU between the UNP and SLFP and said he informed the president his party will support the government on the peace process and engage with the working-level All Party Representative Committee (APRC). However, while the UNP nominated two members to the APRC, one is ill and the other, G.L. Peiris, is refusing to attend APRC meetings. Some speculate that Peiris has aspirations to cross over to the government and take a ministerial portfolio. The Ambassador urged Wickremesinghe to send a UNP representative of some kind to APRC meetings, noting that UNP support will be vital to the success of any southern consensus. Wickremesinghe agreed and said he would nominate a new person to the APRC, but urged the international community to focus on the two major parties rather than the APRC process. He felt that international pressure on both parties could yield a unified position, ideally by February, so the government could present the document to the LTTE and hold talks in March.

¶3. (C) Wickremesinghe also reported that President Rajapaksa had criticized the Panel of Experts (PoE) for providing reports outlining specific proposals rather than offering a range of options (reftel). Nevertheless, Wickremesinghe said, he had urged the president to announce a target date for the APRC to finish considering the PoE report and present a single set of recommendations, perhaps by January 8 or so.

COLOMBO 00002113 002 OF 003

The Ambassador interjected that the Minister chairing the APRC had told him the process would take much longer. Wickremesinghe agreed that was possible, but said it was important to set ambitious targets. According to Wickremesinghe, an early date would permit the UNP to review the document and allow the two major parties to present a consensus position by February, paving the way for talks with the LTTE in March. Wickremesinghe said he reassured the president that the UNP will support the areas of overlap from the four separate reports the PoE submitted. He also noted that any viable solution will need to take the 2000 position vis-a-vis the LTTE as a starting point and build from there. (Note: Wickremesinghe was referring to then-President Kumaratunga's proposal including a continued merger of the north and east and devolution through increased power-sharing with provincial councils. End note.)

Risk President Could Call Elections

¶4. (C) One major component of that position, the merger of the north and east as a single province, is under threat, Wickremesinghe assessed. President Rajapaksa reportedly questioned whether his party would support a continued merger, but Wickremesinghe told him the public would accept it if the merger was presented as part of a broader package. Nevertheless, Wickremesinghe was concerned that if military action in eastern Vakarai was even moderately successful, some in the government would use that to champion a de-merger. He worried that the president could call parliamentary elections, and some would campaign on a military solution, undermining the peace process. For that reason, a timely agreement on a united position is especially urgent, Wickremesinghe stressed. The Ambassador agreed, noting that he has said as much to key decision-makers.

Public Hearing an Unnecessary Delay

¶5. (C) Wickremesinghe also expressed concern about the President's comments to him earlier in the day that he

planned for a series of public hearings around the country to share the outlines of the peace proposal with the public. Wickremesinghe thought this process was unnecessary since the APRC represented all the parties except the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA). He also expressed concern that such hearings could further delay the tabling of a proposal for peace talks.

Potential Role(s) for US Special Envoy

¶6. (C) Wickremesinghe noted he had spoken with U/S Burns about the idea of the US sending a special envoy to encourage the President to accelerate the APRC process and asked for the Ambassador's opinion. The Ambassador responded that the idea of sending a special envoy was a good one, but it would be important for the envoy to have a message. The Ambassador remarked that the process of developing a credible power-sharing proposal would have two critical milestones. First would be to ensure that the APRC process itself stayed on track and produced something credible. If at any point, the APRC process appeared in danger of unraveling, a special envoy could usefully come to help right it. The second key moment would be to get the President to act on the APRC document, instruct his peace delegation to engage seriously, and not allow the idea of hearings to delay, or worse kill, the peace proposal. That interval might also merit a special envoy. Wickremesinghe agreed with both points.

Comment: January Will Be Decisive

¶7. (C) January will be a decisive month. As the Ambassador

COLOMBO 00002113 003 OF 003

and Wickremesinghe agreed, we will need to closely monitor the APRC process to keep it on track to produce a credible power-sharing proposal. The Marxist, Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and others are capable of significant mischief. Almost no one in Colombo, save Wickremesinghe, expects the APRC to come up with a proposal by January 8 (conveniently the date Wickremesinghe returns from a long holiday in South Africa). The USG should be prepared to send a special envoy in January should the APRC process start to unravel. We will also need to be prepared to press the President not to allow his idea of public hearings to unduly delay or squash the tabling of a peace proposal. The APRC process will be difficult enough politically. Public hearings would allow the most extreme opponents a voice. They should not be given a veto, however.
BLAKE